

# **Resistance to Change: Overcoming Institutional and Individual Limitations for Improving Student Behavior Through PLCs**

**John W. Maag**

**University of Nebraska-Lincoln**

## **Abstract**

Many public schools currently have organizational structures that form barriers for dealing more effectively with students' challenging behaviors even though positive school-wide approaches exist and provide empirical support for their use. Nevertheless, resistance to change occurs at both institutional and individual levels. Improving student behavior and learning requires a paradigm shift away from teachers working in isolation to working together. Professional growth also must shift away from one-shot inservices to more intense and long-term training. One method for achieving this type of paradigm shift is through the use of professional learning communities (PLCs). Through these communities, schools can challenge existing paradigms and explore the possibilities that positive supports offer to dealing with students' challenging behaviors. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to describe prominent and misconceived beliefs that contribute to institutional and individual resistance and suggest professional learning communities (PLCs) as a means for moving past this resistance in a collaborative and empowering way to improve student behavior and learning.

## **Resistance to Change: Overcoming Institutional and Individual Limitations for Improving Student Behavior Through PLCs**

Why do people resist and what exactly is it? Physicists understand Ohm's law in which resistance is equal to the voltage divided by the current. An electrician views resistance as a component that opposes the passage of an electric current. Educators view resistance as an unpleasant trait displayed by some students who are noncompliant and uncooperative when given directions to behave in certain ways. Serious oppositional behavior is one of the most frequent reasons young children are referred for psychiatric services (Kuczynski, Kochanska, Radke-Yarrow, & Girnius-Brown, 1987). Walker, Ramsey, and Gresham (2004) believed that noncompliance serves as a "gateway behavior" for children developing serious antisocial behavior. Maag (2001a) believed that terms such as "noncompliance" and "opposition" suggested that the problem resides solely with children whereas the term "resistance" focuses on the interaction between adult and child behaviors.

The belief that resistance originate from adults—as well as children—is both comforting and disconcerting. The good news is that the first step for dealing effectively with resistance involves changing adult behavior—something totally under their control versus trying to change children's behavior which is mitigated by a myriad of factors outside of a school's control. The bad news is that it is difficult for people to change. Similarly, it is difficult for institutions (i.e., public schools) to change their behavior or culture. Individual change is resisted because of the risk that is involved. Institutional

change is resisted because it disrupts the homeostasis (i.e., equilibrium) under which schools function. In turn, schools fear that lack of disciplinary control will result in state legislations and the federal government pulling funding for schools as illustrated in No Child Left Behind (NCLB). In addition, in a national survey conducted by the Public Agenda (2004), 76% of teachers indicated they would be better able to educate students if discipline problems were not so prevalent. Consequently, there has been an explosion of districts implementing school-wide discipline programs.

The typical approach to school-wide discipline focuses on adopting a zero-tolerance policy that includes the use of such reactive approaches as detentions, suspensions, expulsion, loss of privileges, office referrals, and other forms of punishment (McCurdy, Kunsch, & Reibstein (2007)). The assumption is that responding to repeated problem behavior with increasingly severe consequences will teach students that their unruly behaviors are unacceptable and will not be tolerated. Ultimately, it is assumed—at least anticipated—that students will “get it” and stop the displays of dangerous behaviors. However, Sugai and Horner (2006) pointed out that these types of punishment—particularly when used inconsistently and without a positive component—are not only ineffective but also that students with the most severe problem behavior are the least likely to be responsive and, in fact, may get worse.

Unlike punitive and exclusionary approaches, school-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS) focuses on the application of research-based behavioral approaches to teach students skills necessary to behave appropriately in different school contexts (e.g., classroom, recess, cafeteria, hallways) and reinforce their use (Sugai & Horner, 2002). The central message is that schools must become proactive in acknowledging and reinforcing appropriate behavior rather than simply reacting with punishment to student misbehavior (Sugai, Sprague, Horner, & Walker, 2000). The SWPBS model is implemented at three levels or tiers. Tier I focuses on primary prevention and uses universal interventions at the school—and classroom-wide settings. Tier II focuses on group interventions for students who are at-risk for developing serious behavioral problems. Tier III provides specialized individual interventions, usually beginning with functional assessment and culminating with a behavior intervention plan (BIP) to individual students with the most challenging behaviors.

Researchers have found that SWPBS has been effective at the school-wide level across a number of settings for both increasing students’ prosocial behaviors and academic achievement and decreasing their inappropriate behaviors (e.g., Lewis, Sugai, & Colvin, 1998; Kartub, Taylor-Greene, March, & Horner, 2000; Lassen, Steele, & Sailor, 2006; Lewis, Powers, Kelk, & Newcomer, 2002; Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, & Feinberg, 2005; Netzel & Eber, 2003; Warren et al., 2006). In addition, Simonsen, Sugai, and Negron (2008) described how findings from several randomized control trial studies—the gold standard adopted by the U.S. Department of Education for considering a program to be evidence-based—are being conducted and published shortly. Finally, Scott and Barrett (2004) did a cost-benefit analysis indicating that SWPBS saved administrators an average of 15 ¾ days per year previously spent on student office-referral related activities and that students saved 79 ½ days of instructional time per year.

The research-based indicating the effectiveness of SWPBS can be starkly contrasted with schools that rely heavily or wholly on punitive and exclusionary discipline approaches—the latter of which actually contribute to higher rates of students’ challenging behaviors (e.g., Mayer, 1995; Mayer & Butterworth, 1981; Mayer, Nafpaktitis, Butterworth, & Hollingsorth, 1987). In a review of the research, Lipsey (1991) concluded that punishment was one of the three least effective approaches for dealing with school violence. Tellingly, Mayer and Sulzer-Azaroff (1991) found the school-wide discipline programs that relied on punishment without a positive component were associated with higher levels of student truancy and dropping out of school, vandalism, and aggression. A perverse irony is that the

very school-wide programs designed to “get tougher” to address student violence, disruptions, and vandalism may actually increase these behaviors, thus perpetuating an endless and self-defeating cycle of more and more severe negative consequences.

Why do school districts and schools continue to rely almost exclusively on the use punitive and exclusionary discipline systems which are not support by evidence when a compelling research-based exists for using more positive approaches such as SWPBS? Sprague et al. (2001) speculated that schools, in general, have a long history of applying simple and general solutions to complex student behavior problems and expressing understandable disappointment when these attempts do not work as expected. Punitive and exclusionary approaches are often viewed as easy to implement consistently across school staff. However, there are other factors responsible for educational resistance—both at the institutional and individual levels—for adopting more positive and empirically-validated approaches. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to describe prominent, and misconceived, beliefs that contribute to institutional and individual resistance and suggest professional learning communities (PLCs) as a means for educators moving past this resistance and working in a collaborative and empowering way to make positive changes in students’ behaviors and learning.

## **Institutional and Individual Resistance: The Power of Paradigms**

Why are schools and teachers often resistant to change? Haynes (1998) believed resistance was due to educators’ exposure to one program after another with no perceptible improvements in outcomes. Other reasons he gave included misunderstandings or lack of information about a new program, weak or nonexistent commitment on the part of educators to change, and a lack of incentives for implementing different programs. However, Barker (1992) had a more encompassing idea of why institutions and individuals—regardless of the profession or discipline—resist change: paradigms.

Barker (1992) described paradigms as patterns or models for interpreting information. They provide people with rules and regulations that establish boundaries and explain how to be successful by solving problems within the given boundaries. Humans are constantly viewing the world through their paradigms—selecting from the environment those data that best fit their rules and regulations while trying to ignore the rest. Over 38 years ago, Kuhn (1970) wrote his seminal book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and found that paradigms acted as filters that screened data coming into scientists’ minds concerning assumptions they held regarding their theoretical beliefs. Data that agreed with their paradigms were easily recognized and accepted. Conversely, data that did not match their expectations (i.e., that did not fit their paradigms) caused substantial difficulty. The more unexpected the data, the more difficulty scientists had perceiving and accepting them. In some cases, they simply ignored unexpected data as anomalous. Other times, they distorted the data to fit their paradigm rather than acknowledging the data as exceptions to the rules. In extreme cases, Kuhn found that scientists were incapable of perceiving the unexpected data—for all intents and purposes the data were invisible.

A deleterious aspect of paradigms is that they are not based on the examination of objective data. In fact, dominant paradigms are seldom stated explicitly. As Neale and Liebert (1973) wrote many decades ago: “Belief is easily confused with evidence, evidence is easily misunderstood, and misunderstanding is easily perpetuated (p. 189).” Consequently, paradigms are unquestioned ways of understanding a phenomenon that exist in any particular discipline. They are transmitted by means of culture and to succeeding generations from tacit experience rather than being taught or accepted

through the scientific method of discovery. Institutions and individuals take comfort in the dominant paradigms out of which they operate because they are used to anticipate and respond to new trends—such as NCLB in education. However, the visceral reassurance experienced by a dominant paradigm can lead to a false sense of comfort and, subsequently, erroneous interpretations of future trends and new opportunities regardless of the discipline. Barker (1992) provided some interesting predictions that experts in their fields had about the future when operating out of their dominant paradigms:

- The phonograph is not of any commercial value.  
—Thomas Edison remarking on his own invention to his assistant, 1880
- No flying machine will ever fly from New York to Paris.  
—Orville Wright, 1908
- No woman will, in my time, be prime minister.  
—Margaret Thatcher, 10 years before being elected prime minister, 1969
- Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?  
—Harry Warner, Warner Brothers Pictures, 1927
- I think there is a world market for about five computers.  
—Thomas J. Watson, chairman of IBM, 1943

### ***Back to Zero Rule***

Why would these thoughtful and successful individuals be so blinded to the future that they helped to shape? The answer can be found in the “back to zero” rule (Barker, 1992). When a paradigm shifts, individuals and institutions in any discipline go back to zero and start over. Their past experiences and successes guarantee them nothing. Imagine teachers of a school attending the last meeting of the year. Their supervisor—the person who had great influence hiring them and who would have equally great influence initiating the process of terminating them if necessary—states the following:

- Folks, we had a good year and I hope you find the summer to be relaxing and reinvigorating. Oh, by the way, next fall when school begins, none of you will be using the teaching techniques for which you have become proficient. Rather, the district office has determined that everyone will adopt and use a new teaching method called X-49 Sop. We will be hiring new teachers to fill vacancies who have been trained in the X-49 Sop method. I am confident that you all will still want to teach at this school, but you’ll have to change . . .

Do most, if not all, of the staff at that school resist? Absolutely. Why? Because it represents a new way of teaching for which they have not become proficient nor comfortable.

### ***Concept of Consistency and Negative Reinforcement***

There are two other powerful reasons why institutions and individuals resist change. The first reason can be found in the cognitive psychology literature called the “concept of consistency.” The second reason, negative reinforcement, can be found in the applied behavior analysis literature.

All humans strive for consistency in their interpretations of situations and in their interactions with others (Critto, 2000). Consistency breeds predictability which, in turn, leads to feelings of comfort and a sense of self-assurance (Maag, 2001b). Many people resist change because it would take them out of their “comfort zone.” Therefore, even when educators do not get the response they want from students, they will nevertheless continue doing it because it is predictable and comfortable. This phenomenon results in the application of “linear” intervention which, put simply, are “more of the same” and seldom work (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974).

Punishment provides a good example of a linear intervention. Punishment refers to any consequence, after a behavior occurs, that has the effect of decreasing or eliminating that behavior (Maag, 2001b). Therefore, when punishment works for a given student, the teacher would be using it less rather than more often in the future because the untoward behavior would be eliminated and, hence, reduce the necessity to punish. However, when a student misbehaves and is sent to the hallway for 10 minutes on Monday, 15 minutes on Tuesday, and 20 minutes on Wednesday, then the consequence did not function as punishment and was simply “more of the same.” Similarly, if a teacher gives a direction and a student does not follow it, the second technique may be for the teacher to repeat the direction and, if that did not work, the third technique is for the teacher to repeat it louder.

Another reason teachers resist lessening or eliminating the use of punishment—particularly exclusionary practices—as a form of discipline is because of the power of negative reinforcement. According to Skinner’s (1945) operant theory, people behave for one of two reasons: (a) to obtain something enjoyable (positive reinforcement) or (b) to escape something disliked (negative reinforcement). Contrary to popular belief, punishment and negative reinforcement are not synonymous but rather opposites: Punishment is a consequence that reduces or eliminates behavior and negative reinforcement is a consequence that maintains or increases behavior. For example, a teacher may find a student’s incessant misbehavior to be unpleasant and, consequently, sends the student out of the classroom to sit in the hall or principal’s office. The teacher’s behavior of sending the student out of the classroom has been negatively reinforced because that act terminated the unpleasantness of the student’s misbehavior. Any behavior that terminated an aversive is more likely to be performed in the future (Axelrod & Hall, 1999).

Perhaps negative reinforcement unknowingly is partially responsible for explaining the growth of exclusionary practices in schools. Around two decades ago, schools began to adopt “zero tolerance” discipline policies—largely in response to growing school violence (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Zero tolerance was initially aimed at preventing and removing students who carried firearms in schools. The idea was that zero tolerance would send a message to other students who would finally “get it” and cease bringing weapons to school or engage in dangerous behaviors. However, schools did not limit exclusionary practices for just the most dangerous behaviors. Skiba and his colleagues described how some school districts extended zero tolerance measures of exclusion for such minor infractions as non-completion of homework, fighting, possession of cough drops, refusal to follow directions, school disruptions, and smoking (Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Other researchers have found that students have been suspended or expelled for dress code violations, profanity, excessive absenteeism, and shoving matches (Black, 1999; Insley, 2001). Sadly, these “get tough” penalties occur even for minor incidents of student misconduct without the safeguards of the Fourth Amendment (Beger, 2003).

Another insidious byproduct of exclusionary practices is what Patterson (1975) coined the “negative reinforcement trap” to explain coercive relationships that may evolve between teachers and students. In the previous example, a student was removed from the classroom for engaging in behaviors the teacher found unpleasant. If the student found the classroom disagreeable—either because of lacking the necessary skills or considered the lesson boring or too hard or too easy—then being removed from the classroom negatively reinforced the student’s performance of inappropriate behaviors because they terminated the perceived aversiveness of the classroom activities and demands.

Consequently, teachers and students have often been caught in a trap in which both individuals were negatively reinforced for engaging in counterproductive behaviors.

There are situations where students should be removed from a classroom: when their behavior poses a danger to themselves or others or severely compromises the integrity of an instructional lesson. In other words, exclusionary practices should be reserved for the most dangerous and destructive behaviors displayed by students (Stone, 1993). Sadly, some schools take even more punitive measures by physically restraining these students in often therapeutically and legally questionable ways (McAfee, Schwillk, & Mitruski (2006; Ryan & Peterson, 2004). In terms of much lesser offenses, it is nonsensical and oxymoronic to remove a student from a classroom who is, for example, refusing to work by either putting his head down on a desktop or sitting in a teacher's chair. Why would educators want to remove a student who refuses to work from the learning environment? Therefore, it should come as no surprise that schools who use exclusionary practices as the primary or sole form of discipline have lower student achievement test scores—primarily because of the loss of instructional time (Brown, 2007) than schools employing, for example, SWPBS (Scott & Barrett, 2004).

## **Dominant Paradigms and Their Effect on Intransigency**

There is a common belief among educators that an increasing number of students are attending schools who display a wide range of behavior problems and mental health issues. The American Academy of Special Education Professionals indicated that 1 in 5 children and adults have been diagnosed with a mental disorder during the course of a year and high rates student disruptions are increasingly common in schools (Walker et al., 2004). Managing students' challenging behaviors has been one of the biggest concerns for both educators and the general public for over 10 years (American Educator, 1995-96; Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1996). Nevertheless, dominant paradigms regarding schools and how they should react to students' behavior problems are very difficult to change because they represent ways to which institutions and individuals have become accustomed.

Are prevalence figures for students with the most challenging behaviors—those who do not respond to traditional forms of discipline—increasing? Within a SWPBS paradigm, students with challenging behaviors are the 5% who require tertiary intervention (Sugai & Horner, 2006). The 5% prevalence for students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) has been amazingly consistent over the past 50 years from a large and diverse number of studies (Kauffman & Landrum, 2009). The prevalence of children with specific mental disorders varies more; although the prevalence of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (5% - 10%) (Scahill & Schwab-Stone, 2000), conduct disorder (6%) (Kim-Cohen et al., 2005), and anxiety disorders (5%) (Fricchione, 2004) all hover around the 5% figure. The prevalence is less for obsessive-compulsive disorder (2% - 3%) (Zohar, 1999) and bipolar disorder (1%) (Moreno, Laje, Blanco, Jiang, Schmidt, & Olfson, 2007). Unipolar depression varies from a low of 2% for children up to 17% for adolescents (Costello, Mustillo, Erkanli, Keeler, & Angold, 2003).

Although the 5% may be a stable prevalence, the point is that dominant paradigms educators hold regarding discipline do not apply for students with the most challenging behaviors. Yet, it is understandable why dominant paradigms die hard. For example, a teacher's traditional disciplinary techniques may work for 19 out of 20 students in the classroom. Therefore, the solution for the one student for whom it did not work is to do it more (Maag, 1999). The same example could apply for students who do not learn in a classroom. Imagine a teacher providing 20 students with reading instruction and 19 of them are learning well. What is the typical reaction of the teacher to the student who is failing to learn: ineffective instruction or ineffective learner? The latter is the more common belief because the teacher has "proof" that the instruction worked just fine for 19 out of 20 students. The same example could apply for discipline in the classroom. Given this backdrop, several beliefs

reflecting the dominant paradigm that interfere with overcoming limitations and their logical absurdity are described.

### ***Students Need to be Treated the Same: It's Only Fair***

How many times have teachers stated to students on the first day of the school year that it is a “clean slate” and that all students will be treated the same. The rationale is often to reassure students that a teacher will be fair and unbiased. No matter how well-intentioned, this statement is counterproductive for two reasons (Maag & Kemp, 2005). First, because humans are fallible, it is impossible for teachers to treat every student exactly the same way. According to the longitudinal research of Chess and Thomas (1984), effective parents not only treat their children differently but vary their interactions depending on the temperament of each child. Second, trying to treat all students the same makes it difficult to break out of the dominant paradigm and apply nonlinear, novel interventions that are necessary for students with the most challenging behaviors. Responding to students’ challenging behaviors requires educators to be flexible and unfettered by convention. Otherwise, teachers who try innovative techniques with one student run the risk of others complaining “That’s not fair.”

Maag and Kemp (2004) recommended that at the beginning of every new school year teachers tell students, “I’m going to treat each of you differently because I believe each of you have wonderfully diverse qualities” (p. 32). This statement acknowledges the inevitable—that teachers will treat students differently—and also sets the stage for using different approaches with different students. Therefore, when a student says, “It’s not fair that Billy gets to sit in the do-nothing chair” (see Maag 2001a), a teacher can respond by saying, “Don’t worry, I’ll come up with something just as unique for you when you’re having problems following directions.”

Some teachers are just as concerned about “fairness” as are students. These teachers often say that in order to be fair they must treat all students equally. But it is logically absurd to liken fairness to equality, as the following anecdote illustrates:

- Three people in pain enter the emergency room of a hospital. A man has a headache, a woman is experiencing labor pains, and a boy has pain from a broken ankle. The physician, wanting to be extremely fair, gives each person two aspirin and sends them all home (Maag & Kemp, 2004, p. 32).

Educators should embrace diversity in both students’ behaviors and their responses to them. Each student is a unique individual. Equity does not equal equality. Therefore, teachers should formulate their techniques to meet the uniqueness of each student’s needs rather than tailoring the student to fit any one technique (Zeig, 1985).

### ***The Myth of Contagion***

A common rationale for not wanting to treat some students differently is because then every student will be want to be treated differently. The core of this myth is “contagion”—a term used to describe how diseases spread. But it also has a figurative meaning of how harmful ideas are proliferated. For example, a common response from teachers who resist modifying an assignment for one student is “I can’t give Billy a math assignment with only 10 problems on it instead of 20 because then other students will notice and want their assignment to also only have 10 problems on it.” Consequently, the teacher gives Billy all 20 problems and he sits passively and refuses to complete any of them. The teacher’s response not to modify Billy’s assignment reveals a classic case of specious reasoning. Namely, if contagion occurs, then it should show no favorites—the contagion “pendulum” should swing both ways. Consequently, if the teacher was concerned that other students would see Billy get

an assignment with only 10 problems instead of 20, she likewise should be concerned the other students, upon seeing Billy complete no work would, in turn, not complete any of their work. It is absurd to think other students would not want to complete the assignment because of Billy's behavior. Yet, that is the error in reasoning put forth with the contagion argument.

An accommodation recommended by Reid (1999) for students with hyperactivity provides another example. Some teachers institute the very simple accommodation of giving a student with hyperactivity three desks: two on each side in the front of the room and one in the back in the middle. The rule is that the student can move from one of his desks to another without permission as long as it is done silently and without touching other students or their materials. Like in the previous example, many teachers would respond to the three-desk accommodation by saying "I can't give a student three desks because then everyone would want three desks." Consequently, the teacher resists making this accommodation and the student with hyperactivity is out of his seat walking around the classroom and disrupting others. But how many teachers would worry that other students, upon seeing the student with hyperactivity walking around the room would, in turn, get out their chairs to walk around? None. When asked why the other students would not walk around too, a common response is "because they don't have ADHD." In which case, they would not have wanted three desks.

It may, at first, appear puzzling why the teachers in the previous two examples would not at least try these very simple and time-efficient accommodations, let alone the illogical reasons given for not changing. Yet, contagion provides an easy "out." In reality, the phenomenon involved in the resistance may be the "back to zero" rule described previously. Giving a student three desks may be unusual, but it is not complicated. Rather, it is a very simple and effective accommodation (Reid, 1999). However, it sends teachers back to zero and forces them to view teaching differently than what they learned or came to believe. There is another common, yet spurious, reason for teachers being intransigent in their practices: The belief they are teaching some students a "lesson in life."

### ***Lessons in Life Garnered from "Fairness"***

Here is another common response from teachers when recommended to shorten an assignment or reduce the number of problems on it.

- "I understand what you're saying. But when is the student ever going to learn that not everybody in life is going to make accommodations for him? Sometimes, in life, we all have to do the same work as everybody else."

In this scenario, the teacher wants to teach the student a lesson. What lesson does the teacher want to teach? That not all people in life will make exceptions and sometimes the student will have to do what everyone else does. How will the teacher teach this lesson? By giving the student an assignment with the same number of problems on it as the other students. How much of this longer assignment is the student likely to complete? None or very little. Then what lesson did the student learn?

### ***There is Not Enough Time to Make Accommodations for Every Student***

Teaching is time-consuming. However, there is a large discrepancy between the time schools allocate for instruction, time teachers spent providing instruction, time students are engaged, and amount of students' academic responding. For example, Haynes and Jenkins (1986) found that only 44% of allocated time in a special education resource room was spent actively engaged in instruction. What happens to academic responding time? Howell and Nolet (2000) suggested that it is related to the types of decisions teachers make regarding the amount and kind of assignments. Several researchers have found that in some general and special education classes, students spent from 50% to 70% of allocated

time completing independent, paper-and-pencil, or non-teacher directed activities (Adams, 1990; Borg, 1980; Doyle & Carter, 1987; Muyskens & Ysseldyke, 1998). Hollowood, Salisbury, Rainforth, and Palombaro (1994) found that in some classes daily academic responding ranged from a low of 50% to a high of 90%.

It is a challenge for teachers to be more efficient with their instructional time given the pressure of preparing students to take high stakes tests mandated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Yell, Katsiyannis, and Shiner (2006) indicated that progress on these tests are mandated for all students, including subgroups of students identified in terms of disability, socioeconomic status, language background, race, and ethnicity. Consequently, teachers are teaching students how to take these tests as the expense of important aspects of the curriculum that are not receiving instruction. Not surprisingly, students have reported this overemphasis on high-stakes tests hinders their motivation, learning, and academic effort (Pope & Simon, 2005). Even using the optimistically high percentage of 90% student engagement per school day found by Hollowood et al. (1994) in some classes, teachers would still have a minimum of 36 additional minutes per day that could be devoted to making and implementing academic and behavioral accommodations for the few students who could benefit from them. The commonly held belief by teachers that there is no time for accommodations is just not support by research.

### ***Students are Expected to Behave Well***

Over 30 years ago, Howell (1978) described a major impediment to teachers dealing effectively with students' challenging behaviors being the concept of control—the belief that teachers' primary responsibility is to promote academic behavior through instruction and to control inappropriate behavior through punishment. Put another way, adults expect children to be good (i.e., ignore them) and react to them (i.e., punishment) when they are bad—a paradigm that continues to be well-accepted (Maag, 2004). Skinner (1971) believed society embraces punishment because it does not threaten their sense of freedom and dignity. People can choose to behave in a way to avoid punishment whereas reinforcement is incorrectly viewed as external coercion or bribery, thereby squelching internal motivation. Kohn's (1993) popular but misguided book, *Punished by Rewards*, reinforced this view. The adoption of many school districts' use of exclusionary discipline programs described previously reflects both these tenants.

This “control mentality” is as spurious an issue as those described previously, and just as easily dismissed. No teacher would ever approach a student who makes an academic mistake the same way as a student who makes a behavioral mistake. It would be difficult to imagine a teacher, upon seeing a student write down an incorrect answer for a division problem on a worksheet saying, “That’s totally inappropriate, go to the principal’s office, and there will be a conference with your parents. I will not tolerate that behavior in my classroom!” Rather, the teacher would provide corrective feedback. However, when it comes to a student making a social behavior mistake, a teacher’s common—and accepted—response is to remove him or her from the classroom. The dominant paradigm in this situation results in teachers being proactive to students’ academic behavior but reactive to their inappropriate social behavior. A little over two decades ago, Neel (1988) eruditely illustrated this point and its consequences:

- In a reading lesson, who schedules the time of instruction, selects the material, makes the presentation, looks for responses, and then provides correction? The teacher does. When a behavior problem occurs, who schedules it. Provides the materials, evaluates the response, and decides if the incident need to on? The students does. Who, then, is doing the learning? (p. 26)

## **Moving Beyond Intransigency: Impact of Professional Learning Communities**

It is not easy breaking teachers out of the mindset for dealing more effectively with students with challenging behaviors. Barker (1992) coined this intransigency “paradigm paralysis”—a disorder of terminal certainty. A dominant paradigm is that behavior problems originate from students and in order for teachers to deal with them effectively, students must change their behaviors (Maag, 2001a). This perspective results in teachers repeatedly using the same unsuccessful tactics. However, a 180 degree different paradigm may be more unpalatable to teachers than students’ challenging behaviors. Namely, adult behaviors often elicit, contribute, or exacerbate students’ behavior problems. Another variable is that after repeated failures to change students’ challenging behaviors, teachers become frustrated, disheartened, and believe it is an impossible task (Landers, Alter, & Servilio, 2008). Clarke (1982) wrote in his seminal book, *Profiles of the Future*, that “it is really quite amazing by what margins competent but conservative scientists and engineers can miss the mark when they start with the preconceived idea that what they are investigating is impossible.” (p. 21).

It is difficult to change a dominant paradigm because it exists as unquestioned, tacit understanding (Barker, 1992). Nevertheless, Jackson (2009) believed that teachers can change and learn given the right mindset and practice. The professional learning community (PLC) may be a powerful approach for establishing paradigm pliancy—the opposite of paradigm paralysis.

### ***Professional Learning Communities: Fact and Myth***

Professional learning communities (PLCs) in the field of education were an outgrowth from the business sector regarding the capacity of organizations to learn. The idea was to develop collaborative positive and empowering work cultures for educators to improve student learning and behavior (Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004). Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008) indicated PLCs are based on two theoretical assumptions. First, knowledge resides in the everyday experiences of teachers and is effectively understood through critical reflection with others who share the same practical contexts. Second, regularly and repeatedly engaging teachers in PLCs will increase their professional knowledge and enhance student learning and behavior.

School reform efforts began to shift away from traditional one-shot workshops sometimes referred to as “spray and pray” because teachers are inundated (sprayed) with plethora of information over a short period of time and administrators hope (pray) they will use it to improve teaching and student learning. Researchers have found that teachers actively engaged in ongoing support, versus the traditional one-shot workshop, resulted in greater student outcomes (Saxe, Gearheart, & Nasir, 2001). In two recent reviews of the literature, Vescio et al. (2008) and Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, and Shapley (2007) concluded that well-developed PLCs had a positive impact on teaching and student achievement.

The trend toward establishing PLCs is not an easy task. Newmann and Associates (1996) identified five essential characteristics of PLCs. First, schools need to develop shared values and norms regarding students’ ability to learn, how to deal with students’ challenging behaviors, and the proper roles of administrators, teachers, and parents. Second, there needs to be a clear and consistent focus on student learning and behavior. The issue here is not simply a focus on how students are taught but rather how they learn. Third, PLCs need to nurture and reinforce teachers’ use of reflective dialogue by establishing extensive and continuing conversations about curriculum, instruction, behavior management, and student learning. Fourth, a “deprivatizing” practice must be in place in order to make

teaching public. Teaching is not viewed as an individual endeavor that exists only within the four walls of a classroom but rather a shared process among teachers including their successes and challenges. Fifth, there needs to be a clear focus on collaboration—a byproduct of proper implementation of the other four characteristics.

It is common for educators to jump on the bandwagon of the latest fads—many of which are nothing more than a rehash of old unproven methods but capture attention because of glitzy packaging (Maag & Katsiyannis, 2003). This concern was raised by DuFour (2004) who was annoyed that all combinations of individuals with any interest in schools were calling themselves PLCs—from grade level teams to state departments of education. Simply framing work in terms of PLCs does not demonstrate that a learning community actually exists. DuFour also cautioned that the term “PLC” is in danger of losing all meaning when used in such a ubiquitous fashion. In order for PLCs to have any veracity, they must be sustained, job-embedded, collaborative, and have measurable outcomes of improved teaching practices and student learning (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; DuFour, 2004).

### ***Paradigm Pliancy and PLCs***

Paradigm pliancy involves the purposeful seeking out of new ways of improving teacher effectiveness and student learning. Learning communities represent a way to actively and continuously challenge existing paradigms by addressing this question: What do I believe is impossible to do in education but if it could be done would fundamentally improve teacher effectiveness and student learning? This task is not as easy as it may first appear. Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) pointed out how existing public school individualistic norms and school structures in the United States limit time for collaborative planning. Chung Wei, Andree, and Darling-Hammond (2009) examined educational practices of high achieving nations. They found that more than 85% of schools in Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland provided time each week for teachers’ professional collaboration. Furthermore, teachers in countries such as South Korea, Japan, and Singapore spend only about 35% of their time working in the classroom while the remainder is spent engaged in collaborative activities. In general, all these countries had the following common features:

- Time for professional leaning and collaboration built into teachers’ work hours
- Ongoing professional development activities embedded in teachers’ contexts and focused on the content to be taught
- Extensive opportunities for both formal and informal inservice development
- Supportive induction programs for new teachers
- School governance structures that involve teachers in decisions about curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development (ChungWei et al., 2009, p. 29).

Regrettably, structures for such elegant professional development and collaboration rarely exist in United States schools (Birman et al., 2007; Blank, de las Alas, & Smith, 2007). Instead the old paradigm of one-day workshops still prevails even though researchers have found greater effects when programs offered 30 to 100 hours of intense training spread out over 6 to 12 months (Yoon et al., 2007). The new PLC paradigm would require certain restructuring to allow for smaller school size, common planning time, lower staff complexity, and empowerment of teachers as decision makers (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996). The fact that this information is now over 10 years old attests to the power of paradigm paralysis. Nevertheless, Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001) found that although the process of shifting paradigm structures is typically sluggish and laden with confusion, conflict, and silence, it is possible to steadily work through these obstacles and build pathways for communities to develop.

## Conclusion

We currently live in an era of paradigm shifts in many disciplines. Not every organization has the ability to formulate successful new paradigms. However, in the field of education, PLCs provide a supportive climate and structure for reducing resistance to change and improving teacher effectiveness and student learning. Toward the end of his book, Barker (1992) stated that “One person’s paradigm shift may be another person’s reality. Somewhere in the world, alternative paradigms are already part of a system” (p. 208). In the case of resistance to change, other high-achieving nations have provided the diagram and data for educational reform. All schools have to do is exert the courage to attain it.

## References

- Adams, M. J. (1990). *Beginning to read: thinking and learning about print*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois, Center for the Study of Reading.
- American Educator (1995-96). Elements of an effective discipline strategy. *American Educator*, 19(4), 24-27.
- Axelrod, S., & Hall, R.V. (1999). *Behavior modification: Basic principles*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.
- Barker, J.A. (1992). *Paradigms: The business of discovering the future*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Beger, R. R. (2003). The “worst of both worlds”: School security and the disappearing fourth amendment rights of students. *Criminal Justice Review*, 28, 336-354.
- Birman, B., LeFloch, K. C., Klekotka, A., Ludwig, M., Taylor, J., Walters, K., et al. (1997). *State and local implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, volume II: Teacher quality under NCLB: Interim report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development.
- Black, S. (1999). Why suspension and expulsion should be your court of last resort. *American School Board Journal*, 186(1), 34-37.
- Blank, R. K., de las Alas, N., & Smith, C. (2007). *Analysis of the quality of professional development programs for mathematics and science teachers: Findings from a cross-state study*. Washington DC: Council of Chief State School Officers.
- Borg, W. R. (1980). Time and school learning. In C. Denham & A. Liberman (Eds.). *Time to learn* (pp. 33-72). Washington, CD: National Institute of Learning.
- Brown, T. M. (2007). Lost and turned out: Academic, social, and emotional experiences of students excluded from school. *Urban Education*, 42, 432-455.
- Chess, S., & Thomas, A. (1984). *Origins and evolution of behavior disorders: From infancy to early adult life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Chung Wei, R., Andree, A., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2009). How nations invest in teachers. *Educational Leadership*, 66(5), 28-33.
- Clarke, A. C. (1984). *Profiles of the future: An inquiry into the limits of the possible* (2nd ed.). NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Costello, E. J., Mustillo, S., Erkanli, A., Keeler, G., & Angold, A. (2003). Prevalence and development of psychiatric disorders in childhood and adolescence. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 60, 837-844.
- Critto, A. (2000). *Consistency: Being coherent*. Lanham, MD: University Press of American.
- Darling-Hammond, L., & Richardson, N. (2009). Teacher learning: What matters? *Educational Leadership*, 66(5), 46-53.
- Doyle, W., & Carter, K. (1987). Choosing the means of instruction. In V. Richardson-Koehler (Ed.). *Educational handbook* (pp. 188-206). White Plains, NY: Longman.
- DuFour, R. (2004). What is a “Professional Learning Community”? [electronic version]. *Educational Leadership*, 61(8), 6.
- Elam, S. J., Rose, L. C., \* Gallup, A. M. (1996). Twenty-eighth annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll on the public’s attitudes toward the public schools. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 78, 41-59.
- Fricchione, G. (2004). Generalized anxiety disorder. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 351, 675-682.
- Grossman, P., Wineburg, S., & Woolworth, S. (2001). Toward a theory of teacher community. *Teachers College Record*, 103, 942-1012.
- Haynes, N. M.(1998). Lessons learned. *Journal of Education and Students Placed at Risk*, 3, 87-99.
- Haynes, M. C., & Jenkins, J. R. (1986). Reading instruction in special education resource rooms. *American Educational Research Journal*, 23, 161-190.
- Hollowood, T. M., Salisbur, C. L., Rainforth, B., & Palombaro, M. M. (1994) Use of instructional time in classrooms serving students with and without severe disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 61, 242-253.
- Insley, A. C. (2001). Comment: Suspending and expelling children from educational opportunity: Time to reevaluate zero tolerance policies. *American University Law Review*, 50, 1039-1077.
- Kartub, D. T., Taylor, Greene, S., March, R. E. & Horner, R. H. (2000). Reducing hallway noise: A systems approach. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 2, 179-182.
- Kauffman, J. M., & Landrum, T. J. (2009). *Characteristics of emotional and behavioral disorders of children and youth* (9th edition). Columbus, OH: Merrill.
- Kim-Cohen, J., Arseneault, L., Caspi, A., Tomas, M. P., Taylor, Al, Moffitt, T. E. (2005). Validity of DSM-IV conduct disorder in 4 ½ - 5 – year old children: A longitudinal epidemiological study. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 162, 1108-1117.

- Kohn, A. (1993). *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Howell, K. W. (1978). Evaluation of behavior disorders. In R. B. Rutherford, Jr., & A.G. Prieto (Eds.), *Severe behavior disorders of children and youth (Vol1., pp. 116-125)*. Reston, VA: Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders.
- Jackson, R. R. (2009). *Never work harder than your students and other principles of great teaching*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Landers, E., Alter, P., & Servilio, K. (2008). Students' challenging behavior and teachers' job satisfaction. *Beyond Behavior, 18*(1), 26-33.
- Lassen, S. R., Steele, M. M., & Sailor, W. (2006). The relationship of school-wide positive behavior support to academic achievement in an urban middle school. *Psychology in the Schools, 43*, 701-712.
- Lewis, T. J., Powers, L. J., Kelk, M. J., & Newcomer, L. L. (2002). Reducing problem behaviors on the playground: An investigation of the application of school-wide positive behavior supports. *Psychology in the Schools, 39*, 181-190.
- Lewis, T. J., Sugai, G., & Colvin, G. (1998). Reducing problem behavior through a school-wide system of effective behavioral support: Investigation of a school-wide social skills training program and contextual interventions. *School Psychology Review, 27*, 446-459.
- Lipsey, M. W. (1991). The effect of treatment on juvenile delinquents: Results from meta-analysis. In F. Losel, D. Bender, & T. Bliesener (Eds.), *Psychology and law* (pp. 131-143). New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Louis, K. S., Marks, H. M., & Kruse, S. (1996). Professional community in restructuring schools. *American Educational Research Journal, 33*, 757-798.
- Luiselli, J. K., Putnam, R. F., Handler, M. W., & Feinberg, A. B. (2005). Whole-school positive behaviour support: Effects on student discipline problems and academic performance. *Educational Psychology, 25*, 183-198.
- Maag, J. W. (1999). Why they say no: Foundational precises and techniques for managing resistance. *Focus on Exceptional Children, 32*(1), 1-16.
- Maag, J. W. (2001a). *Powerful struggles: Managing resistance, building rapport*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.
- Maag, J. W. (2001b). Rewarded by punishment: Reflections on the disuse of positive reinforcement in schools. *Exceptional Children, 67*, 173-186.
- Maag, J. W. (2004). *Behavior management: From theoretical implications to practical applications* (2nd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Maag, J. W., & Katsiyannis, A. (2003). Practical considerations for selecting educational methodologies. *Principal Leadership, 4*(2), 35-38.

Maag, J. W., & Kemp, S. E. (2005). I can't make you: Attitude shifts and techniques for managing resistance. In P. Zions (Ed.). *Inclusion strategies for students with learning and behavior problems* (2nd ed., pp. 247-281). Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.

Mayer, G. R. (1995). Preventing antisocial behavior in the schools. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 28, 467-478.

Mayer, G. R., & Butterworth, T. (1981). Evaluating a preventive approach to reducing school vandalism. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 62, 498-499.

Mayer, G. R., & Sulzer-Azaroff, B. (1991). Interventions for vandalism. In G. Stoner, M. K. Shinn, & H. M. Walker (Eds.), *Interventions for achievement and behavior problems* (pp. 559-580). Washington, DC: National Association of School Psychologists.

Mayer, G. R., Nafpaktitis, M., Butterworth, T., & Hollingsworth, P. (1987). A search for the elusive setting events of school vandalism: A correlational study. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 10, 259-270.

McAfee, J. K., Schwilk, C., & Mitruski, M. (2006). Public policy on physical restraint of children with disabilities in public schools. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 29, 711-728.

McCurdy, B., L., Kunsch, C., & Reibstein, S. (2007). Secondary prevention in the urban school: Implementing the behavior education program. *Preventing School Failure*, 51(3), 12-19.

Moreno, C., Laje, G., Blanco, C., Jiang, H., Schmidt, A. B., & Olfson, M. (2007). National trends in the outpatient diagnosis and treatment of bipolar disorder in youth. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 64, 1032-1039.

Muyskens, P., & Ysseldyke J. E. (1998). Student academic responding time as a function of classroom ecology and time of day. *Journal of Special Education*, 31, 411-424.

Neale, J.M., & Liebert, R.M. (1973). *Science and behavior: An introduction to methods of research*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Neel, R. S. (1988). Classroom conversion kit: A teacher's guide to teaching social competency. In R. B. Rutherford, Jr., & J. W. Maag (Eds.), *Severe behavior disorders of children and youth* (Vol. 11, pp. 25-31). Reston, VA: Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders.

Netzel, D. M., & Eber, L. (2003). Shifting from reactive to proactive discipline in an urban school district: A change of focus through SWPBS implementation. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 5, 71-79.

Newmann, F. M., & Associates (1996). *Authentic achievement: Restructuring schools for intellectual quality*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Patterson, G.R. (1975). *Families: Applications of social learning to family life*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Pope, D. C., & Simon, R. (2005). Help for stressed students. *Educational Leadership*, 62(7), 33-38.

- Public Agenda. (2004). Teaching interrupted: Do discipline policies in today's public schools foster the common good? New York: Public Agenda.
- Reid, R. (1999). Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: Effective methods for the classroom. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 32(4), 1-20.
- Ryan, J. B., & Peterson R. L. (2004). Physical restraint in school. *Behavioral Disorders*, 29, 154-168.
- Saxe, G., Gearhart, M., & Nasir, N. S. (2001). Enhancing students' understanding of mathematics: A study of three contrasting approaches to professional support. *Journal of Mathematics Teacher Education*, 4, 55-79.
- Scahill, L., & Schwab-Stone, M. (2000). Epidemiology of ADHD in school-age children. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 9, 541-555.
- Scott, T. M., & Barrett, S. B. (2004). Using staff and student time engaged in disciplinary procedures to evaluate the impact of school-wide PBS. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 6, 21-27.
- Simonsen, B., Sugai, G., & Negrón, M. (2008). Schoolwide positive behavior supports: Primary systems and practices. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 41(1), 32-40.
- Skiba, R. J., & Peterson, R. L. (1999). The dark side of zero tolerance: Can punishment lead to safe schools? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 80, 372-382.
- Skiba, R. J., & Peterson, R. L. (2000). School discipline at the crossroads: From zero tolerance to early response. *Exceptional Children*, 66, 335-347.
- Skiba, R., & Rausch, M. K. (2006). School discipline systems: Alternatives to suspension and expulsion. In G. C. Bear, & K. M. Minkie (Eds.), *Children's needs III: Development, prevention, and intervention* (pp. 87-102). Washington, D.C.: National Association of School Psychologists.
- Skinner, B. F. (1945). The operational analysis of psychological terms. *Psychological Review*, 52, 270-277.
- Skinner, B. F. (1971). *Beyond freedom and dignity*. New York: Bantam.
- Stone, D. H. (1993). Crime and punishment in public schools: An empirical study of disciplinary proceedings. *Journal of Trial Advocacy*, 17, 351-398.
- Sugai, G., & Horner, R. H. (2002). The evolution of discipline practices: School-wide positive behavior supports. *Child and Family Behavior Therapy*, 24, 23-50.
- Sugai, G., & Horner, R. H. (2006). A promising approach for expanding and sustaining school-wide positive behavior support. *School Psychology Review*, 35, 245-259.
- Sugai, G., Sprague, J. R., Horner, R. H., & Walker, H. M. (2000). The use of office discipline referrals to assess and monitor school-wide discipline interventions. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 8, 94-101.

Thompson, S. C., Gregg, L., & Niska, J. M. (2004). Professional learning communities, leadership, and student learning. *Research in Middle Level Education Online*, 28(1), 35, 20.

Walker, H. M., Ramsey, E., & Gresham, F. M. (2004). *Antisocial behavior in school: Evidence-based practices (2nd ed.)*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.

Warren, J. S., Bohanon-Edmonson, H. M., Turnbull, A. P., Sailor, W., Wickham, D., Griggs, P., & Beech, S. E. (2006). School-wide positive behavior support: Addressing behavior problems that impede student learning. *Educational Psychology Review*, 18, 187-198.

Watzlawick, P., Weakland, J., & Fisch, R. (1974). *Change: Principles of problem formation and problem resolution*. New York: Norton.

Yell, M. L., Katsiyannis, A., & Shriner, J. G. (2006). The No Child Left Behind Act, adequately yearly progress, and students with disabilities. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 38(4), 32-39.

Zeig, J. K. (1985). (Ed.). *Ericksonian psychotherapy: Volume I*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Zohar, A. H. (1999). The epidemiology of obsessive-compulsive disorder in children and adolescents. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 8, 445-460.

[To top](#)